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ABSTRACT

Many of the students at Olive-Harvey College, a community college on Chicago's south side, are struggling to balance their education with low income, service sector jobs and family needs while living in communities plagued by drugs and violence. The question is how teachers can help these students to attain their educational goals, despite their life crises. To find the answer, one instructor turned to the students who had successfully completed her English 102 capstone writing course the previous fall--students who are the exception and not the rule. She interviewed 13 out of 20 students in the class and found that some interesting patterns emerged. The successful students were not demographically distinct from the general student population and did not have academically privileged backgrounds. Nine of the 13 had children and 7 were single moms. Four things that did stand out were that: (1) parents of young children were not making it through; (2) successful students had at least one person in their lives who encouraged them; (3) all the successful students could articulate their motivation for being in school and had a clear plan for their education; and (4) students should be taught to use the academic skills they learned to make sense of and respond to the problems that threatened their learning. To respond to the four things that stand out, the English 102 instructor suggested various things the institution could consider implementing. (NKA)

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Toward a "Formula for Success" -- Using Oral Histories to Help Students Succeed When Everything Seems to be Working Against Them.

Speaker 1: Sorry I missed class, but . . . my boss changed my schedule for this week.

Speaker 2: My mother says she won't watch my daughter anymore, I have no one else.

Speaker 3: My boyfriend was shot.

Speaker 1: Sorry my paper is late, but . . . I took the kids and left, he was beating us up.

Speaker 2: My daughter stopped breathing, I'm with her in Mississippi, don't know when I'll be back.

Speaker 3: My brother was shot.

Speaker 1: Sorry I missed the exam, but . . .I was in jail.

Speaker 2: I'm waiting for the man from housing to come and fix my apartment. DCFS says that if it is not fixed in 5 days they will take my kids from this unsafe environment . . . and from me.

Speaker 3: I was shot.

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I have heard each of these "excuses" and many more from my students. At least every week a student comes to me with a legitimate reason for why he or she has not done the work of the class. Many more students don't come to me – they just stop coming. I teach at Olive-Harvey College, a community college on Chicago's Far South Side. Only 8.2% of the new students who enrolled in the Fall of 1997 graduated with a degree or certificate by the Fall of 2000.

Many of our students are single mothers who are struggling to balance their education with low income, service sector jobs (making an average family income of $10, 679) and the needs of their children who are likely to be (as their parents were) in some of the worst school in the city, all while living in communities plagued by drugs and violence. Students at Olive-Harvey are facing more challenges than most. However, all of you have had students whose academic success is threatened by the lives they are living beyond the classroom doors.

So, what to do? How can we teachers best help our students to attain their educational goals, despite their life crises? The immediate human impulse is to want to "help them out" by making things easier for them; by letting them slide. Doing this, however, only makes us complicit in the ways in which our social institutions set our underprivileged students up to fail. Because too many teachers have passed them along, it is incumbent upon us to guarantee that before they leave the relatively nurturing environment of the community college, our students know what they need to survive and thrive in their future academic, professional and intellectual work.

So, again, what to do? To find the answer, I turned to the students who had successfully completed my English 102 course last fall. To be clear, these students

are the exceptions, rather than the rule. English 102 is our capstone writing class and, because of the longer papers and research, students often still struggling with basic skills find it terribly challenging. In my three sections of English 102, I started with 86 registered students, of whom 28 or 33% dropped and 38 or 44% failed. Of the 20 students who passed the class, I interviewed 13 or 65%. Clearly, 13 students are not enough to give me a sample that would please a statistician. However, after almost 6 hours of listening to this group of students (and many more teaching them), some interesting patterns began to emerge -- patterns that suggest ways to help more of our students become like these 13.

These students are not demographically distinct from our general student population. 11 of them were African American, as are 90% of our students. The other two were Latino (8 % of our students), and European American (1% of our student body). Two thirds of Olive-Harvey students are women, as were 11 of the students in this group. The average age of the students I interviewed was 30, only 2 years higher than the average age of the Olive-Harvey student population.

The successful students do not have academically privileged backgrounds. Like their peers at Olive-Harvey, most do not have parents with a college degree (only 14% of the Olive-Harvey credit students have mothers with at least a bachelors and 12% have fathers with such a degree). As many grew up with the expectation that they would **not** go to college as with the expectation that they would. While the majority felt that they were strong students, most also found themselves in troubled, non-college prep high schools.

Four Things That Did Stand Out

- from each I'm proposing institutional and/or pedagogical changes which could help more students succeed
- some of these suggestions may be helpful for you, others you may already be doing or they many not apply
- the larger point is the process of working backwards from the students first in your classrooms and then in your institutions

1. Parents of young children are not making it through.

At Olive-Harvey, many of our students have young children. In my sample, 9 of the 13 students had children and 7 of these students (54%) were single moms (as compared to 31% of O-H credit students). However, only one of my successful students had a child under 3. The younger students (3 under 20) who succeeded had no children. There was only one student between 20 and 30 (the exception with the 2 year old -- Latonya). The other nine students were older (between 31 and 42) and had children who were, on average, nine years old. Some of these older students had tried to come back to school earlier, but found the demands of school and parenting too difficult.

To consider:

- On-site daycare for infants through preschoolers
- Flexible scheduling (classes which meet once a week)
- Distance learning
- Target mothers of young children as an at-risk population with focused counseling (fewer classes), workshops, and support groups.

2. Successful students have at least one person in their lives who encourages them.

This encouragement does not have to involve a large time commitment. While some students did have tangible support like babysitting or financial assistance, many did not. However, each student did have someone who they could talk to when they were discouraged who would help them "pick themselves back up and get back in the ring."

To consider:

- Encourage students to identify such supporters in their lives. This could be done in an orientation or college survival program. Alternatively, it could be built into your entry-level courses through writing assignments like:

  _____ Describe a person who you can turn to for encouragement.

  _____ Write a letter to someone who you would like to be your mentor during your college experience. Your goal is to persuade this person to assume this role. Be sure to explain why you would like them to mentor you, what each of you would contribute to and gain from this relationship and how it would work logistically.

- Create opportunities for such support relationships to develop by setting up mentoring programs. Advanced students, particularly those in honor's programs and on the Dean's List, could be encouraged to act as mentors for community service credit or even for a work-study job.

3. All the successful students could articulate their motivation for being in school and had a clear plan for their education.

To consider:

- Early academic and career counseling that requires students to investigate options, define their goals and develop an educational plan.
- Writing assignments in entry-level courses can also help students formulate clear goals and plans for achieving such goals. For example, consider assignments like the following:

  ——— Interview someone working in a career you think you might be interested in and then write up a report for other students about this career area. Your report might focus on any of the following: the rewards and frustrations of such a career; the kinds of people who do best in this career; the education and skills necessary for such a career; the best ways to get a job in this career; a typical day in the life of someone in this career; possibilities for advancement in this career; the variety of jobs in this career area. Collect these reports into a career guide that your students can publish for the school's counseling office.

  ——— Compare and contrast two different majors or career options that you are considering.

  ——— Write a paper that first describes who you want to be and what you want to be doing in five years and then describes the process for accomplishing these goals.

4. Teach students to use the academic skills they are learning to make sense of and respond to the problems that threaten their learning.

My successful students have as many crises as their less successful peers (sick kids, abusive spouses, temporary housing, addicted relatives, grueling work schedules – 1 student was taking 4 classes, spending 10 hours a week in church, and working 65 hours a week). It is impossible to ignore these issues and why would you want to? Acknowledging them as a subject of study allows students to see how the academic skills they are acquiring are immediately relevant to their lives beyond the doors of our institutions. This is particularly powerful in the community college setting where students are continually moving between the college and their communities.

To consider:

- Schedule early (week two or three) one-on-one conferences with students to establish a relationship with and learn about them. What you learn in these conferences can then help you tailor writing assignments to the students.
- Develop assignments that require students to analyze and respond to challenges facing them either as an individual or as a member of a community. For example, consider the following assignments for freshman writing courses:

  ——— To help students work on argument and audience, have them write a problem-solution paper in the form of a letter. See the attached sample assignment sheet.

For a research assignment, have students do a problem-solution and/or cause-and-effect paper on some issue in their community. Please see the attached assignment sheet. For sample papers from this assignment, visit our website at http://faculty.ccc.edu/mcleary/mcleary/English&Speech/SoSide/index.htm.

[The presentation ended with two students, Latonya Lofton and LaRai Williams Barrett, reading selections from papers they completed for this research assignment.]

Sample Assignments

Dr. Navarre Cleary
English Composition 101
Spring 2002

The Problem / Solution Essay

With this paper, you will write for a specific audience, analyze a problem, and argue for a solution. The problem should be something relatively local and one with which you have direct experience. In other words, issues like abortion and the death penalty are too general for this assignment. Instead, write about problems like how to improve training at your job or security in your apartment building. If you have to convene the Congress or the United Nations to solve your problem, it is too broad for the scope of this paper.

Write your paper as a letter to those whom you wish to act upon your solution. The final product should be something you can drop in the mail with confidence. Be sure to:

(1) motivate your essay by convincing your readers that the problem you have chosen is, in fact, a problem and one that should and can be solved;

(2) acknowledge other possible solutions to the problem and explain why your solution is superior (is it, for instance, the most economical? the most complete? etc.);

(3) acknowledge and address objections to your solution;

(4) support your analysis of the problem and argument for a solution with concrete reasons and specific evidence.

This two-page paper should be typed and double-spaced. The first draft is due on Monday, April 1st. Bring three copies. Remember to include a one-paragraph, self-evaluation of the paper, noting what you are happy with in the draft and what you would have changed if you had more time.

Extra Credit Options: Mail your letter to your intended audience and then follow-up by contacting them to see what they plan to do about the problem to which you have drawn their attention. Let me know what happens. Alternatively, you can write a Letter to the Editor of a local paper arguing for your position. This letter needs to be concise since it should be no more than 300 words.

Dr. Navarre Cleary
English 102, Fall 2001

Researching Chicago's South Side

For this research-argument essay, we will focus on the general subject area of the South Side for three reasons:

(1) because it is a subject area broad enough to accommodate many very different essay topics,

(2) because you will not have to go far to locate lots of information on your topic, and

(3) because the best research and argument papers are those based on local concerns and interests. This is true because you will write a better, more engaged and engaging, paper on a topic in which you are interested. It is also true because focusing on specific, local concerns is often a powerful and effective way to address much broader issues.

Within the general subject area of the South Side, you need to pick a location about which you wish to write and an arguable issue related to this location. For your location, think of someplace you are curious about, familiar with, or would just like to know more about. In the packet of essays attached, you will find articles on a public housing development, a business district, schools, a church, a hospital and a community center. Other places you might consider are

- places where people gather to hang out, like a unique or well-used park,
- places where people gather to play sports, like the basketball courts with the best or longest-running games,
- a historic area or neighborhood like Pullman, Bronzeville, or 47th street
- formal neighborhood institutions like churches, schools, ward organizations, community centers, YMCAs which are doing or have done something unique or significant in the community,
- informal neighborhood institutions like the restaurant everyone goes to for breakfast on Sunday mornings, the beauty salon or barbershop where a group or regulars gathers, the hardware store that has been around forever.
- places where people live like a particularly unified block, public housing, or a troubled nursing home
- places that are the source of problems for the community such as a dump or factory which is an environmental hazard, an abandoned building, a liquor store.

Your essay can explore the causes and/or effects of the role of this place in your community or it can attempt to analyze a problem related to this place and propose a solution to this problem.

Your essay should be able to show how your argument about this specific place has broader implications. In other words, your essay should make clear why readers should care about this particular place. For example, if you show how great a beauty salon is because it brings the community together, then you can claim that current urban planning

should encourage such small businesses. Or, if you argue that a nursing home should be shut down, then you could suggest a state policy for better monitoring nursing home care.

Your final draft should be 8-12 typed, double-spaced pages. You should follow the MLA format for citing your sources. You should cite approximately 5-10 outside sources.

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